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The Effect of Contextual Inferencing Strategies on EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Reading

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Abstract

This experimental study investigated pre-intermediate level Turkish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' attitudes towards reading in English, the effect of their attitudes towards unknown words in reading texts on their attitudes towards reading in English in general and the effect of explicit strategy instruction in contextual inferencing strategies on pre-intermediate level EFL students' attitudes towards reading in English. The study was carried out at Bülent Ecevit University, School of Foreign Languages, with the participation of 82 pre-intermediate level EFL learners and two instructors. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews in two phases: pre- and post-treatment. An "Attitudes towards Reading in English" questionnaire was used to find out the students' pre-training attitudes towards reading. Data from the pre-questionnaire and pre-interviews provided information about the effect of the students' attitudes towards unknown words in reading texts on their attitudes to reading in English. After a three-week explicit strategy training period and a two week interval, the students were given the same questionnaire and interviews were held. The analyses of the pre-training data revealed that the students' attitudes towards reading in English were neutral, and their negative attitudes towards unknown words in reading texts had a negative impact on their attitudes towards reading in English. The comparison of the pre- and post-treatment data indicated that explicit instruction in contextual inferencing strategies had a positive effect on the low attitude students' attitudes towards reading.

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1. Introduction and review of literature

Reading in a foreign language has been one of the primary foci of second language acquisition researchers in recent years. Zhou (2008) states that the acquisition of L2 reading skills is a priority for many language learners around the world. Many EFL students rarely experience a situation where they have to speak English on a daily basis, but they might need to read in English quite often in order to benefit from various pieces of information, most of which is recorded in English (Eskey, 1996). Moreover, reading is fundamental for all academic disciplines (White as cited in Lei, Rhinehart, Howard, & Cho, 2010). Therefore, reading skills must be promoted in order for students to be able to deal with more sophisticated texts and tasks in an efficient way (Ur, 1996).

In order to foster such an important skill, it is important to consider the close relationship between reading and vocabulary knowledge, which is the most important factor with regard to the comprehension of a text (Baldo, 2010; Nagy, 1988; Nassaji, 2006; Schmitt, 2004). Although vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient on its own to explain reading comprehension (Baldo, 2010), Anderson and Freebody (as cited in Nagy, 1988) point out that a learner's vocabulary knowledge profile is the best predictor of that learner's level of ability to understand the text. In a consistent way, Schmitt (2004) also asserts that the percentage of known and unknown vocabulary is one of the most significant factors determining the difficulty of a text for a learner.

Therefore, the strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension makes the need for teaching students more words apparent. However, the massive size of the vocabulary learning task makes it clear that direct instruction cannot be sufficient on its own for all vocabulary acquisition (Nagy, 1988; Sternberg as cited in Walters, 2004). Walters (2004) reports that readers have several ways to cope with unknown words while reading: they can look up the word in a dictionary, they can consult someone about the meaning of the word, they can try to guess the meaning from context, or they can ignore the word. However, excessive dictionary use is discouraged by many educators and researchers due to the fact that looking up words frequently interferes with short-term memory and hinders the comprehension process (Knight, 1994). Similarly, in addition to being impractical, asking someone what the word means may also have some distracting effects on text comprehension and it seems to be impossible in every reading situation. As a result, it seems appropriate for teachers of English as a foreign/second language to consider teaching learners about the use of context to guess the meaning of unknown words. It is important that learners have methods that they can apply on their own, outside the instructional setting (Read, 2004).

As far as ways of dealing with unknown words in a reading text are concerned, guessing the meaning from context is recognized as a powerful strategy by many researchers (Nagy, 1988; Nation, 2008; Schmitt, 2004; Walters, 2004), so it is crucial to make L2 learners aware of contextual inferencing strategies. Context refers to the text surrounding a word or passage, and contextual inferencing, namely lexical inferencing, is usually defined as informed guessing of the meaning of unknown words with the help of context clues (Jelic, 2007). According to Paribakht and Wesche (2009), identifying an appropriate meaning of a word requires finding useful cues from the word or the context. The process of inferring word meaning from context is not simple, though. It is a challenging task, especially for L2 learners, due to their limited knowledge of the target language (Walters, 2006). Therefore, the need to present students with a solution to solve the difficulty of the task is evident. Teaching strategies to L2 learners and training them in the use of context to guess word meanings might be considered as an ideal way to manage this. As Nagy (1988) asserts, it is worth the time and effort in the classroom.

In addition to vocabulary knowledge, another important factor that influences success in reading is students' attitudes towards this skill, since many researchers agree that motivation can be thought of as one of the key predictors of success in second/foreign language learning (Mori, 2004). According to Wigfield and Guthrie (1997), students' attitudes toward or feelings about reading affect their willingness to actively participate in activities. They investigated different aspects of children's reading motivation and how it is related to the amount and depth of their reading, and they found that children's motivation predicted their reading amount and depth. Kaniuka (2010) also attempted to explore the relationship between successful reading instruction and students' attitudes towards reading, and he concluded that students who received effective reading instruction had higher scores with regard to their attitudes toward reading. The results of his study suggest that it is possible to help learners' build positive feelings towards reading by providing them with successful reading instruction.

Training students to use contextual clues in order to infer the meaning of unknown words can be an ideal way of helping students to repair the negative effects of vocabulary problem. Many studies have been conducted to investigate

different aspects of vocabulary and reading, and a number of studies have addressed the strategy of contextual inferencing. This study aims to contribute to the literature by examining the contextual inferencing strategy from a different perspective. It is the aim of this study to explore whether instruction in the use of context to infer the meaning of words from context has an effect on EFL learners' attitudes towards reading in English.

2. Research Questions

1. What are pre-intermediate level Turkish EFL students' attitudes towards reading in English?
2. How do the students' attitudes to unknown vocabulary in English reading texts affect their attitude to reading in English in general?
3. Does explicit strategy instruction in contextual inferencing affect learners' attitudes towards reading?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants & Setting

The study was conducted in an EFL setting, at the Department of Basic English at Bülent Ecevit University, Zonguldak, Turkey, where university students study English for general purposes during a complete academic year before they start their university education at their departments. 82 pre-intermediate level students participated in the study. The study was carried out with pre-intermediate level students because they are expected to have learned the basic structures of the language, and gradually they start to read more complicated texts where the possibility of encountering unknown words also increases. The students were from four intact classes. Two of the classes formed the experimental groups, and the other two formed the control groups. The participant instructors were responsible for these classes for the main course, in which reading courses are integrated. Each participant instructor taught one of the experimental and one of the control groups so that the teacher effect was mitigated.

3.1. Materials and Instruments

In this study, data were collected in two phases. In the first phase, an "Attitudes towards Reading in English" questionnaire was employed to gather data about the students' present attitudes to reading. After the first set of data was collected, the students in the experimental groups were given explicit strategy instruction in contextual inferencing strategies with the help of the training materials. Then, in the second phase, in order to gain an understanding of the possible changes in the participants' attitudes towards reading after the strategy instruction, the same questionnaire was administered as the post-questionnaire two weeks after the strategy training.

The "Attitudes towards Reading in English Questionnaire" questionnaire was a compilation of four different sources. Twenty-six items were adapted from The Attitude/Motivation Test Battery, which was developed by Gardner (1985). Twelve items were either taken directly, or adapted from the "Motivations for Reading Questionnaire", which was developed by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997). Furthermore, 16 items were adapted from an "Attitudes towards Reading Questionnaire" which was previously used in a Master's Thesis (Tezdiker, 2007). Finally, six items were written by the researcher in order to include some more specific statements about the participants' attitudes towards unknown words in an English reading text. The questionnaire consisted of five different sub-categories: *joy of reading*, *self-efficacy*, *importance of reading*, *personal investment*, and *vocabulary in reading*. The questionnaire originally included a pool of 61 items. In order to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, check the internal consistency of the questions as a whole and individually, and learn about how well it was worded, it was piloted with a similar group of students from another institution. The items that did not perform well were eliminated. As a result, a 43-item Likert scale questionnaire was obtained. The questionnaire proved to be reliable with a .924 Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Similarly, the Cronbach's Alphas for each category were above .7, indicating a good internal consistency.

The strategy training included both the explicit instruction in the contextual inferencing strategies and practice with

these strategies. The training was carried out during the classes that were spent on the reading parts of the main course and it went on for three weeks, including the practice with the strategy. During these three weeks, 12 hours were spent on the strategy instruction and practice. The materials that were used with the experimental groups for the strategy training were provided by the researcher after reviewing the related literature and adapting or arranging them so that they were presented in a clear and easily understandable way.

3.2. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 18). In an attempt to answer the first research question, the first set of data was gathered from the five-point Likert scale “Attitudes towards Reading” questionnaire and the results from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively. The same set of data was used in order to answer the second research question, through the closer scrutiny of the items in the vocabulary in reading category. The second set of data, which was collected after the three-week strategy training was given to the experimental groups, was gathered from the second administration of the same questionnaire again. After the data from the post-questionnaire were entered into SPSS, tests of normality were conducted in order to find out whether the data were normally distributed. Since the data were normally distributed, each group’s pre- and post-questionnaires and the attitudes of low and high attitude students in the pre- and post-questionnaires were compared using parametric statistical methods.

4. Results and Discussion

RQ. 1. What are pre-intermediate level EFL students’ attitudes towards reading in English?

The mean score and standard deviations for the overall questionnaire were calculated to find out the participants’ attitudes towards reading. The mean scores of each category in the questionnaire were also calculated in order to gain insight into the different aspects of the participants’ reading related attitudes. Table 1 below shows the overall and categorical mean scores:

Table 1- Overall and categorical means

	Category type	Mean	Std. D.
1.	The importance of reading	4.13	.52
2.	The joy of reading	3.39	.67
3.	Self-efficacy	2.97	.63
4.	Vocabulary in reading	2.71	.82
5.	Personal investment	2.45	.68
	Overall questionnaire	3.23	.51

As can be seen in the table, the students at Bülent Ecevit University appeared to have a rather neutral attitude towards reading ($m=3.23$). In addition, as illustrated in the table, the mean scores indicate that the importance of reading category has the highest mean score. In other words, the participants generally agreed that being able to read in English is important, which can be considered as a positive contribution to their attitudes. As for the second highest mean score, the students’ responses to the items in the joy of reading section showed that the participants were neutral about the items implying that they enjoy reading in English. The students’ responses to the items in the self-efficacy category were just below the neutral mark, which revealed that the participants view themselves as neither good nor bad readers of English. The vocabulary in reading category, which served the purpose of providing information about the students’ feelings about the unknown words in reading texts, had comparatively

lower means, suggesting that the students feel somewhat negatively about encountering unknown vocabulary items in reading texts. Finally, based on the lowest means which belonged to the personal investment category, it can be said that the participants do not put much effort into reading in English.

RQ. 2. How do the students' attitudes to unknown vocabulary in English reading texts affect their attitude to reading in English in general?

Among the five categories of the questionnaire, the vocabulary in reading section provided the most valuable information needed to answer the second research question. With the help of the overall means for this category, the correlation between the students' attitudes towards unknown words in reading texts and towards reading in English in general were calculated to see if there is a relationship between them.

Table 2- Overall and vocabulary means correlations

	Overall vocabulary in reading category mean
Overall pre-questionnaire mean	.72** p=.00

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

As the above table illustrates, there was a significant correlation between the overall vocabulary in reading category means and the entire questionnaire means, $r=.72$, $p(\text{one-tailed})<.01$, suggesting that the students' attitudes towards unknown words in English reading texts are associated with their attitudes towards reading in English in general.

In addition to the overall means for this category, the students' responses to the individual items in this category were also analyzed. The analyses revealed that the participants generally do not feel very positively about the unknown vocabulary items in reading texts. Below is a more detailed analysis of the students' responses to the nine statements in the vocabulary in reading category:

Table 3- Descriptive statistics for the vocabulary in reading category

Items in the 'Vocabulary in reading' category of the questionnaire	N	Mean	Std. D.
1. Students who claim they can't understand English texts because of unknown words are just making excuses.	82	2.88	1.29
9. The possibility of encountering unknown words in texts does not affect my feelings about reading in English.	82	2.68	1.24
14. I feel afraid of encountering unfamiliar words before I start reading an English text.	82	3.26	1.25
20. I tend to give up reading when I don't know the meaning of some words in an English reading text.	82	2.68	1.24
28. I don't like reading something in English when the words are too difficult.	82	3.24	1.21
33. I would like reading in English more if there were not unknown words in texts.	82	3.80	1.25
35. The unknown words in reading texts keep me away from reading in English.	82	2.93	1.28
38. I feel anxious when there are a lot of words that I do not know in an English reading text.	82	3.67	1.12
42. The unknown words are the basic reasons behind my negative feelings about reading in English.	82	3.55	1.17

As is clear from the table, item 33 has the highest mean score among the items in the vocabulary in reading category, which suggests that unknown words in reading texts cause the students develop negative feelings about reading and if they did not have the vocabulary problem, they would feel more positively about reading. The mean scores of items

38 and 42, which are also relatively higher, reveal that the participants consider unknown words as a problem affecting their feelings negatively about reading in English. What is more, they view the vocabulary problem as the main reason behind their negative feelings about reading in English. Items 9 and 4, which include statements representing a positive attitude towards unknown words, have relatively lower means and based on this, it is possible to say that the students do not think very positively about the unfamiliar words in reading texts. By looking at the means for items 14 and 28, it can be said that the fact that the students might encounter unfamiliar words while reading is a factor that affects their attitudes towards reading in general. On the whole, the mean scores for the individual items in the vocabulary in reading category appear to show that the students' attitudes to reading in general are affected negatively by their attitudes to unknown words in reading texts.

RQ. 3. Does explicit strategy instruction in contextual inferencing affect learners' attitudes towards reading?

In order to be able to explore whether explicit strategy instruction in contextual inferencing strategies had an impact on the participants' attitudes towards reading, the pre- and post- questionnaire means of each condition group were compared through paired samples t-test and the table below shows the results of this comparison:

Table 4 . Comparison of pre- and post-questionnaires

Categories	Exp. I	Exp. II	Cont. I	Cont. II
Paired Samples T-test	Sig.(2-tailed)	Sig.(2-tailed)	Sig. (2-tailed)	Sig.(2-tailed)
Joy of reading	.832	.757	.089* SE=.168 $t(18)=1.799$.062* SE=.087 $t(14)=2.03$
Self-efficacy	.681	.719	.634	.152
Importance of reading	.245	.884	.042** SE=.158 $t(18)=2.187$.086* SE=.115 $t(14)=1.84$
Personal investment	.100	.610	.702	.297
Vocabulary in reading	.832	.418	.433	.264
Overall	.881	.434	.143	.357

*=approaching significant, **=significant

As the above table displays, as far as the experimental groups are concerned, the results of the paired samples t-tests show that there are no significant differences in students' attitudes. That is to say, the participants' attitudes towards reading do not appear to have changed significantly after they received the three-week strategy instruction. As for the control groups, it is seen that there was not a statistically significant difference in the control groups' overall attitudes to reading from pre- to post-questionnaire. However, the differences in *the joy of reading* category for both control groups were approaching significance, suggesting a trend towards a decrease in this category over the treatment period. Furthermore, the difference in *the importance of reading* category was statistically significant for Control I group, and approaching significant for Control II group.

When the overall and categorical pre- and post-treatment means of the condition groups were compared, the results did not seem to reveal a statistically significant positive effect of the strategy instruction. However, since each condition group consisted of students with both high and low attitudes to reading and considering that they may have balanced each other, it was meaningful to compare the pre- and post-questionnaire means of high and low-attitude learners.

Based on the pre-questionnaire results, the students whose overall means were below 3.0 on a five-point Likert scale were identified as low attitude students, and the students whose overall means were above 3.0 were labeled as high attitude students. These students' means from the pre- and post- questionnaires were compared through paired samples t-tests in order to be able to see whether there was a change in their attitudes towards reading in English. The

paired samples t-tests were performed separately for the students in the experimental and control groups. Table 5 displays the results:

Table 5. Comparison of high and low-attitude students before and after the treatment

	Pre-Questionnaire		Post-Questionnaire		Paired Samples T-test
	M	Std. D.	M.	Std. D.	Sig. (2-tailed)
High-attitude (exp.)	3.57	.35	3.43	.67	.243
High-attitude (cont.)	3.47	.33	3.23	.54	.007 SE=.0800 $t(21)=3.00$
Low-attitude (exp.)	2.64	.27	2.99	.61	.045 SE=.1577 $t(14)=2.20$
Low-attitude (cont.)	2.67	.25	2.77	.43	.237

As illustrated in the table, the pre- and post-questionnaire means of the high attitude students in the experimental groups do not seem to be different from each other. However, the results of the paired samples t-test for the high attitude learners in the control groups showed that the difference in their pre- and post-questionnaire means was significant, revealing that their attitudes went down from the beginning to the end of the study. As for the low attitude students in the experimental groups, the comparison of their mean scores in the pre- and post-questionnaires revealed that their means were significantly higher in the post-questionnaire. This result suggests that explicit strategy instruction in contextual inferencing strategies did have an effect on the low attitude participants' attitudes towards reading, resulting in more positive attitudes. Regarding the low attitude students in the control groups, their attitudes did not change significantly from the pre- to post-questionnaire.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the pre-intermediate level Turkish EFL learners' attitudes towards reading in English, the effect of their attitudes towards unknown words in reading texts on their attitudes towards reading in English in general and the effect of explicit strategy instruction in contextual inferencing strategies on EFL students' attitudes towards reading in English.

The analysis of the data gathered from the first administration of the "Attitudes towards Reading in English" questionnaire revealed that the pre-intermediate level learners at Bülent Ecevit University had neutral attitudes towards reading in English. In other words, pre-intermediate students neither like reading in English, nor do they hate it. This may be related to the students' attitudes towards reading in Turkish since Coady (as cited in Hulstijn & Bossers, 1992) stated that poor reading in the second language may be because of the transfer of the students' poor reading habits in their first language. Similarly, Grabe and Stoller (2002) also argued that students bring with them basic attitudes to L2 reading, which are usually based on their L1 reading experiences. The students' perceptions of reading in their native language have an impact on their emotional responses to reading in a second or foreign language.

The study also revealed that the students' attitudes towards unknown words in reading texts affect their attitudes to reading in English in general in a negative way. Most of the students seemed to agree that they would like reading in English more if there were not unknown words in reading texts. It seems clear that the novel vocabulary that the students encounter in English reading texts plays a major role in the students' feelings about reading in English.

After it was revealed that unknown words in reading texts can be a problem for learners, resulting in negative attitudes towards reading, the next question was whether contextual inferencing strategies, which are thought to help learners to compensate for their insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Parel, 2004), would have an effect on students' negative attitudes to reading in English. The results indicated that the explicit strategy instruction in contextual inferencing strategies did have a positive effect on the low attitude students' attitudes towards reading in English, causing them to develop more positive feelings about reading in English. Therefore, it can be argued that training in contextual inferencing strategies helped the low attitude students overcome their problems about encountering unknown words in reading texts by presenting them with ways to deal with unfamiliar words, in addition to giving them the chance to practice and apply the strategies. Furthermore, the conclusion that the students who already had higher attitudes also benefited from the training can be drawn, considering their maintained level of attitudes. Although the strategy instruction did not facilitate any higher attitudes for these students, it appeared to enable them to maintain

their existing positive attitudes towards reading. This is also supported with the decrease in the attitudes of the high attitude students in the control groups, which suggests that within the treatment time, the high attitude students in the control groups lost their positive attitudes towards reading in English. The conclusion that the low attitude students were more responsive to the training is quite plausible as they were much more in need of ways to overcome the vocabulary problem in reading.

All in all, the results of the present study lend support to Haastrup's (1991) argument that contextual inferencing strategies are essential to repair the negative effects of the students' lack of vocabulary knowledge. It is clear that the participants who experienced problems with unknown words in reading texts used these strategies to compensate for their limited vocabulary knowledge and thus, repaired its negative effects. If it had not been for the strategy training, the situation would go on just as Nation (2008) describes it: the result is an important decrease in contextual focus, and frustration when learners have problems because of unknown words in a text. It is possible that explicit instruction in contextual inferencing strategies has reversed the situation.

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